DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 245 219 CS 208 062

AUTHOR Rocklin, Edward L.
TITLE The Resonance of Dialogue: Composing a Literature Class.
PUB DATE Mar 83
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (34th, Detroit, MI, March 17-19, 1983). For related documents, see CS 208 060-062.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Class Activities; *Classroom Communication; *Classroom Techniques; *Literature Appreciation; *Perceptual Development; *Process Education; Story Telling; Teaching Styles; *Writing (Composition); Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS Stochastic Analysis

ABSTRACT

A class can be seen as forming a larger unit of mind, a unit that becomes its own context, and this context can become the scene not only for an error-correcting but also a growth-producing process. Perception is always a comparison between at least two messages, and what is perceived is the difference between them. This principle is critical to teaching, since much of what is called teaching style depends on how differences are elicited and used. One way to create a positive context is by creating shared experience between students, teacher, and text by means of storytelling. Sharing creates connections to bridge differences and make them less threatening. If this creation of common ground is successful, then these transactions become habitual, and an ongoing community or group is formed. A safe space is also created, one in which members of the group can take larger risks and share wider experiences. In both literature and composition classes, this leads to a stochastic process, a form of interaction between parts of the mind. The process begins in each individual's mind, then continues as the differences between students emerge as a result of shared responses. Students listen, and compare their own interpretations to those of others. The effect of these comparisons is both to make a story problematic rather than transparent and to precipitate debate. Rather than emphasizing the knowledge or wisdom obtainable from a work, emphasis is placed on the processes students can master that are used to compose talks, classes, essays, dialogues, or new selves. (CRH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED245219

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

The Resonance of Dialogue: Composing a Literature Class

Edward L. Rocklin

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Edward L. Rocklin
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Prologue

Steven Zemelman's talk has focused on Bateson's principles as showing us how writing is a stochastic process for the individual student, and how this process can either be self-correcting or self-constricting, depending on the context in which the student is asked to perform. And Chezia Thompson's talk has suggested how some contexts can, in fact, become constricting, even to the point of creating double binds, so that the process is shut down--which means that the teacher's first task becomes unknotting and reweaving the context, so that students can engage in the process productively, rather than see it as an enemy.

In my own talk, I will focus on how the class itself, the collection of people in a room, can be seen as forming a larger unit of mind, and a unit which becomes its own context; and I will be suggesting that this context can become the scene not only for an error-correcting but a growth-producing process.

I am going to get at these points by describing in some detail one particular class session; and in order for you to follow this analysis I need to supply one more principle from Bateson to go with those Steven has outlined. This principle is the concept of difference and differences, and it is at the heart of Bateson's thinking.

What is a difference and why is it so critical? Bateson says:

> The interaction between parts of mind is triggered by difference, and difference is a nonsubstantial phenomenon not located in space or time; difference is related to negentropy and entropy rather than to energy. [Mind and Nature, p. 92]

This means that perception is always a comparison between at least two messages,

CS208 062

and that what we perceive is the difference between them; or to put it another way, all information is news of a difference that makes a difference. Bateson illustrates this concept by describing how we discern a bump in a road or a chalkboard: we perceive the bump by feeling a change as we move an auto or a finger over it. Furthermore, Bateson points out, this repetition of information with slight differences seems to be fundamental to all forms of life: binocular vision, mathematical explanations which use both formulas and graphic displays, and sexual reproduction all depend on the existence of and interactions between differences. This principle, then, forms a groundwork upon which all perception, all thinking, and indeed all the play of mind is built. It is also, I will suggest, critical to all teaching, and much of what we may call teaching style depends on how we elicit and use differences. As I describe the particular class session, you will note differences, and more differences than I will be able to detail, let alone analyze, in my talk today.

Storytelling: "First Confession"

At Clarion University the introductory course for non-majors is called The Literary Experience, and part of that experience in my sections of the course is storytelling: each class meeting begins with a student telling a story she has chosen. On this particular day, the teller was Peggy Howard, and she told Frank O'Connor's "First Confession," which none of us, myself included, knew. She took about ten minutes to tell, but I am going to give a shorter and much less polished rendition today.

First Confession

This is the story of a little boy named Jackie who lived in Ireland a long time ago. When Jackie was seven, it came time for him to make his first con-

fession, and since his mother was working his older sister, Nora, was given the task of walking Jackie to the church. This Nora did, all the time wailing over Jackie's sins and announcing how sorry she was for him--until they reached the church, when her malicious nature got the better of her, so that she cried out, "I hope the priest thinks you so bad he sends you to the bishop!"

As they stood in the dark church, Jackie thought of escape, but then a poor anguished man got behind him, blocking any way out. The man muttered in such a despairing way that Jackie was sure the man had a grandmother, for only a grandmother could account for such heart-sorrow--but this man could at least confess, while Jackie knew he would make a bad confession and go to hell.

Nora's turn came, and then she emerged, hands clasped, and walked away to the altar, looking like a saint, while Jackie marvelled at her hypocrisy. Then Jackie entered the confession box. But in his confusion he climbed up on the ledge where adults rested their elbows, and when a young priest slid open the window and asked "What are you doing <u>there</u>?" Jackie lost his hold, tumbled down, hit the door, and sprawled out in the aisle. The priest ran out, Nora ran up, crying "Oh you dirty little beggar!" and slapped Jackie on the ear. The priest grabbed her, pulled her off, and hissed, "How dare you hit the child like that you little vixen? Go do your penance or I'll give you more!"

Then he turned to Jackie and asked, "Is this your first confession?"

"'Tis, father," Jackie sobbed.

"Ah!" said the priest, "you might take all day with the crimes of a lifetime to confess, so let me finish with these old ones--you can see <u>they</u> don't have much to tell!"

Jackie was suddenly relieved, for here was an intelligent priest, who realized that a boy with seven years' sins to confess would need more time than people

with only one week of bad behavior since their last confession. He started to re-examine his conscience and, barring the one bad thing about his grandmother, it did not seem too bad. And indeed once they were back in the box Jackie decided he might as well get it over with quickly, and he said, "Father, I had it all arranged to kill my grandmother."

He could see that the priest was shaken by that, and after a pause the man asked, "What ever put that shocking idea into your head?"

"Father, she's an awful woman: she takes porter and snuff, and walks around barefoot, and knows I don't like her, and gives pennies to Nora, and my Da sides with her and beats me, and one night I was so heart-scalded I made up my mind to kill her, and I planned to chop up her body and carry it away in my barrow! And I tried to kill Nora, too, with a bread-knife when I was hiding from Gran under the table, only I missed her!"

"Ah--that must be the little girl who hit you," said the priest. "Someone will go for her with a bread-knife one day, and he won't miss! But Jackie, you must have great courage. Between ourselves, there's lots of people I'd like to do the same to, but I'd never have the nerve. Hanging is an awful death. Why, I've seen dozens of fellows hanged, and they all died a-roaring. And lots of them had killed their grandmothers, but they all said it wasn't worth it."

And so ten minutes later they emerged from the confessional, and the priest walked Jackie out of the church, making Nora jealous, and when she asked Jackie what penance he'd been given she was shocked to learn it was only three Hail Marys. And when Jackie assured her that he <u>had</u> told the priest about Gran and about going for Nora with the bread-knife, she could barely believe it. Worse yet, she noticed Jackie sucking on some candy, and when she learned that the priest had given the candy to him she wailed, "Lord God, some people have all the luck.

'Tis no advantage to try to be good. I might just as well be a sinner like you!" And she ran home wailing, but Jackie whistled the whole way.

Class discussion

After Peggy was done, we all jotted down our responses to the story, and then went round the room sharing the responses. In the course of this sharing, three students--Elaine Urda, Craig Stoeckle, and Karen Pingor--expressed a sense that the priest had failed to conduct a proper confession. Craig, for example, said:

> The priest did not do his job! That's not the way a priest should behave. He should tell the boy that it is a sin to think about murdering his grandmother, not go making up a story. He did not really do a confession: he had a talk with Jackie, like a friend, he told him something that made the boy feel good. But all that stuff about seeing men hung for killing their grandmothers and how they said it wasn't worth it--none of that was what he should have done.

The question the other students then asked was, of course, "What should the priest have done then?" Dana Campanini, for example:

> I think the priest did what needed to be done. Jackie's only seven yearsold, he does not really know, does not really imagine death, or what it would be like to kill someone, cut her up, carry her away. So the priest got him to confess, to have the experience of admitting his sin, then being given a penance, and absolution, which is what confession is supposed to be.

Once these two positions were clear, there was a back-and-forth amplification and restating. But as the debate showed signs of getting stuck, I reminded the class that we had the contrasting figure of Nora to look at. And as they discussed Nora's actions, the students realized that we could infer that her confession, which we don't hear, had probably followed the correct formulas--yet Nora had not really given up her sins. So Jane Licatovich said

> What the priest did with Nora didn't work, but what he did with Jackie did work. And if he'd yelled at the boy, given him a severe penance, Jackie might have held back in the future. So he would make a bad confession, feel guilty, maybe even become a hypocrite like Nora.

And Dave Blozowich added

> I think the priest did what they often do: many people go to confession to be told they've sinned, get forgiven, and do it again. But the priest knows they know, and are just going through the motions. So sometimes he will tell a story--like the parables in the Bible. Or think about the sermon after the Mass: I'm sure that most people don't get the point right away (I know I don't), but after you leave the church you think about it during the week, and you find the meaning in it for yourself--which is what they want you to do.

David's remarks also led me to point out that the priest was not only imitating Jesus in using a story, but that he was also, in effect, modelling the behavior he wanted to elicit, because he confessed his own sins in intention, as well as inventing (as we assume) those repenting murderers who had committed sin. So he was using the confession to teach confession.

From this point on, the class's energy was mainly spent in working out further connections within the story, and with their own sense of Catholicism as embedded in the story: especially with exploring how religion was <u>real</u> for Jackie, <u>unreal</u> for Nora, and how the priest had responded to the difference. Finally, two contrasting comments at the end of the class helped all of us realize something about the process we were going through. Craig Stoeckle, who had started the debate, said

> I see what we were getting at--I guess I <u>misunderstood</u> the story, my response was wrong, I took the wrong point of view.

And Elaine Urda asked

> So is the only way to change to have your responses, and get them out, and then see things differently, become different?

Both of these remarks brought the class to the issue we are discussing here today, that is the issue of what characterizes the process that is being enacted in such a class?

Difference as the spark for stochastic process

Stochastic processes are essentially forms of interaction between parts of mind, and as Bateson argues "Interaction between parts of mind is triggered by difference." If we look at the class I have just described, then what we see are differences on a variety of levels and at a variety of moments. There is, first, the differences within the mind of each individual student as he listens to the story, responds, begins to construct an interpretation. Second, there are the differences between the students, which emerge as we share responses, but before full dialogue begins. As they hear these differences, students also begin comparing their own interpretation against those that converge and those that diverge from it. The effect of these comparisons, it seems to me, is to make the story problematic rather than transparent, and thus to precipitate debate. These differences are, of course, differences between members of the audience: to take an obvious example, non-Catholics had no trouble with the priest's actions if they had no sense of what a confession "should be," while Catholics, who did have such a schema, divided in their response. So we had not two but three different responses or messages to compare, and it was these comparisons that led to the initial polarizing debate.

But it was here that the stochastic process began: for once the positions were stated, the circuits of difference and comparison grew more complex: we started to not only compare the interpretations with each other, but both against the story. As I see it, what happens here is that we move from taking our responses as a given or absolute to taking them as hypotheses about the story: having voiced their responses and set up contrasting positions, if people can stay loose enough they can detach themselves a bit from all the responses, and regard them as tentative formulations. So we could recognize that both responses are logical reactions to the tale, both interpretations make sense--and, critically, that both

are incomplete: when compared not only to each other but to the story, both tend to miss the details the other captures. Thus, the class began to take its own responses as another text, to be revised into a more adequate hypothesis, taking account of the key points on both sides to arrive at a fuller, richer, more carefully qualified interpretation or understanding of "First Confession." And as the process continued, it alternated between the random and the orderly: someone like David Blozowich would add another idea, about how priests use stories in confession and sermons, and to the rest of us this would come as something close to a random observation, yet we would then try to work it into our discourse, use it to help create the new order of a fuller interpretation.

It is important to recognize the place of <u>difference</u> in this self-corrective process. The entire process depends on the initial difference of response, so that these intial responses should not be labeled as "right" or "wrong," but rather taken as incomplete. The fact that each response (usually) contains some but not all of the truth is precisely what triggers the whole process, and drives us all to go further: no differences, no dialogue, and no dialogue, no self-corrective process.

It is also important to recognize that in working in this manner much of the control comes from the process itself, rather than from any single individual trying to control the process. What makes the class <u>move</u> is the ongoing injection of novel, if not truly random, ideas, any one of which may spark off further connections that no single individual, even the teacher, could have made on her own. Even as each individual tries to create more order, the process as a whole tends to slightly disrupt that order with new information or insight from other people's experiences, or new observations about the story, so that it is the class as a whole that moves toward formulating a richer understanding--which each individual will also re-interpret so as to fit the needs of her own identity.

Context: from individuals to community, transactions to transformations

Peggy Howard told "First Confession" in the ninth week of a sixteen week semester, and I want to step back and say something about how the class got to that moment, using Bateson's ideas to think about the long-term process a class can move through in the course of a semester. What I am particularly concerned with is the complex interplay between context and process, which I am going to (over)simplify here as a series of steps and phases.

The first step is simply to create a positive context, which means creating a rich network of relations between a roomful of students, a teacher, and a collection of texts. The key here is to create common ground, and common ground is most easily created through having people share experiences: hence my use of storytelling, literature performed live, immediately responded to, and, most of all, publicly shared, with the members of the class acting both as spectators or auditors and participants. Storytelling, that is, makes it obvious that our focus is double, not simply on texts but rather texts-plus-audience. Furthermore, sharing in this way will also quickly impel us to confront, acknowledge, deal with, and become more comfortable with differences between us through the obvious differences in response; even as we also create connections to bridge the differences and make them less threatening.

If these practices are successful, then these transactions become habitual, and we have, however minimally, transformed ourselves into a community, which means into an ongoing group with its own purposes and methods of operation. In particular, we have become a group that is able to use our differences. The aim here is not only to create a community but to have the community further transform itself into a safe space. By safe space, I mean a place where members of the community start to take bigger risks, sharing some of their wider differences, and making more powerful connections, simultaneously, with their own experience

and with each other. Put most simply, I think that even as we learn to treat our responses as hypotheses and test them out, we also learn to treat the self more fluidly, less guardedly--if not as a hypothesis nonetheless as changeable. In talking about "First Confession," for example, we were also confessing and sharing differences in ways that help us discover common ground and explore what it is like to be other, to be different than we are now. In this way the class as a whole can act in the ways we believe literature acts, as a safe space to test out selves one is not, or not yet: to explore what one might become. The writing process enacts the same self-transforming experience. If the community is experienced as open and supportive, then someone will surprise us all (and herself) by taking a risk; and if she and we all gain insight, nderstanding, and connections from that risk, then the group will have a cue or model for another possible move.

Again, if this transaction is repeated, if people come to trust that they can take the risk of exposing differences, then the community itself will also change. Here the process can become a positive spiral: greater risks successfully negotiated by a few individuals increase everyone's trust in the group's ability not only to tolerate but to actively accept differences, support risks; and greater trust in the group, which means in themselves, leads more people to take the risk of sharing their personal, idiosyncratic, seemingly "crazy" responses. The group as a whole develops a powerful resonance as people echo and connect.

Obviously, not every class goes this far. Obviously, I am talking about an ideal--but by <u>ideal</u> I do not mean "unattainable goal" but instead "a goal that is realistic and possible": and it is a goal I am always aiming for. What Bateson gives me, then, is a model for thinking about how the interplay of mind and mind can move in this direction, and what my role in initiating and sustaining

such a process can be. Specifically, his map suggests three main actions as being at the heart of a teacher's role in a literature class (and in a writing class and perhaps in any class):

[1] To structure the class so that a community is likely to form and transform itself into a safe space that, in fact, increases the chance for risk-taking.

[2] To initiate activities which are likely to bring up the basic formal problems and processes involved in reading and responding to literature or texts generally; and in particular to teach people how to use differences as a starting point for a self-correcting, interpretation-generating interplay of minds.

[3] To keep each individual class session moving in such a way that anyone who wants to can contribute to and learn from the dialogue, taking risks and making connections that would be impossible to make reading alone.

I am less interested, then, in transmitting information, knowledge, or even the wisdom embodied in great works of literature such as King Lear, and more interested in the transactions I can set in motion, the processes I can enable students to master.

Conclusion: teaching a process, learning trust

I want to conclude by pointing to two ideas that connect all three of our talks, even as they define an underlying challenge we are dealing with.

First, what Bateson also helps us see is what he calls the unity of the processes of mind and nature, and more specifically the necessary unity of the processes we deal with as teachers. We have been discussing different levels of a hierarchy, and different contexts, but identical principles. And I am also suggesting that if a literature class repeatedly performs the type of activities described here, then students will not only acquire a suite of moves they can make when reading texts but they will also be participating in an externalized version of the composing process.

Second, what Bateson helps us recognize is that as teachers of composition and

literature, we confront the issue of trust: what makes this so difficult is that you can not teach trust, although people can learn to trust. We need to remind ourselves that all our talk of process means nothing if we cannot get the students to enact that process so as to make it their own. And this means acknowledging that while we offer people the opportunity to find a new coherence, they will also face the potentially tragic possibility of letting go of old connections while not making new ones--the potential for incoherence, frustration, and a sense of defeat. To remind yourself of that risk, you need only recall your feelings when you started a major seminar paper, or your dissertation--or when you start a class at the beginning of the semester. What Bateson offers us, and what we hope we are offering you, is one of the best maps we know of for thinking about and living through this process by which you compose a talk, a class, an essay, a dialogue, a book, or a new self--the process in which you trust yourself to make sense of your life, alone and with others.